

Why “restore” the Channel Islands?

Why and how can we recover the natural diversity and abundance of life that the islands and surrounding marine waters are capable of supporting? Islands tend to be rich in endemic species and contain important habitat for species such as seabirds and pinnepeds that forage over thousands of square miles of open ocean but rely upon the islands for breeding. The greatest threats to islands are introduced species that disrupt the natural balance of life.

The National Park Service has removed non-native animals from the Channel Islands and dramatically improved their ecological integrity, productivity, and health. Successful animal removal include rabbits and cats from Santa Barbara Island, burros from San Miguel Island, feral pigs and cattle from Santa Rosa Island, and feral sheep and horses from Santa Cruz Island. All of these islands were nearly stripped of vegetation due to non-native animals. Natural recovery, as depicted below in comparative aerial photos of San Miguel Island has been dramatic.



Tim Hauf

CHANGE AND RECOVERY ON SAN MIGUEL ISLAND: By 1930, grazing by non-native sheep and burros had reduced San Miguel Island to what one biologist called a “barren lump of sand” (left). With the non-native grazing animals removed by the mid-1970s, vegetation has started to return as seen in the January 2000 photograph (right). The sandspit that was so prominent in 1930 has disappeared.

The ecological reverse, bringing back native animals that have disappeared from the park, is just as important. Plants and animals have been lost due to hunting, overgrazing, pollutants, and disturbance. Legal remedies and other management actions are bringing back some of these species. Early commercial hunters decimated northern elephant seals. Protective laws and the isolation of the islands allowed their population to grow substantially. Bald eagles and peregrine falcons have been returned to the Channel Islands following extirpation due to DDT poisoning. Some island subspecies, such as the San Miguel Island skunk and the Santa Barbara Island song sparrow, are lost forever.

Conservationist Aldo Leopold stated, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” The signs of recovery seen following the removal of introduced species at the Channel Islands are living proof of the value found in protecting these unique island ecosystems.